

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Fifteen, Number One

Holy Shit: Excremental Philosophy, Religious Ontology, and Spiritual Revelation

Sean Christopher Hall, Goldsmith College, University of London, UK

Abstract: Žižek seems to find great inspiration in Christianity. It is central to *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (Žižek 2000), *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Žižek 2003), and *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek and Millbank 2009). Indeed, even in his more singularly philosophical and political texts we find that Christianity is often vital to his overall argumentative strategy. (Žižek 2011) (Žižek 2012) This is somewhat surprising given his declared position as an atheist. Yet what seems to appeal to him in Christianity is that, as a religion, it exists not only as theory, but also that it is productive of theory.

What I want to explore here is one aspect of this interest. Specifically, I wish to look at how Žižek's theoretical take on Christianity can be incorporated into a more general framework of understanding that takes its original departure from the work of Simone Weil. To do this, I intend first to explore a religious ontology that derives from a numbering system that is based, respectively, on both Weil and Žižek. This is an ontology that makes God as 1, the Devil as ∞ , human beings as 0, and Christ as - 1 (i.e. as less-than-nothing). Being - 1 will be shown to make Christ a challenge to the symbolic order. Second, I want to demonstrate how, by occupying the place of being less-than-nothing in this framework, Christ is able to offer something to us that is spiritually revelatory.

Key Words: Religion, Ontology, Christianity, Shit, Nothingness

“It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and more contemptible sort.” (SE 27 = SWR = 332)

Holy Shit: Excremental Philosophy, Religious Ontology, and Spiritual Revelation¹

The broad ontological default in current philosophy is such that what is asserted and discussed is almost always in some way positive or affirmative, either overtly or tacitly. Thus, we find that we concern ourselves with such things as existence (against non-existence), life (against extinction) construction (against destruction), success (against disaster), flourishing (against decline), permanence (against transience), growth (against waning), burgeoning (against decay), revival (against degeneration), cultivation (against waste), solidity (against disintegration), continuity (against discontinuity), flow (against interruption), attraction (against disgust), cleanliness (against dirt), beauty (against ugliness), good (against evil), love (against hate), and virtues (against vices).² In this way the ideas of such things as perpetuity, strength, immovability, perfectability, and even progress are somehow valorized.³

But what would we think if the things we have placed outside the brackets above were the real aberrations? What happens if the supposedly positive things that we wish constantly to discuss and reflect upon are interruptive or violatory of something more fundamental that we wish to avoid, reject, renounce, or deny - either in ourselves or others? In other words, have we produced a metaphysics and made an ontology (or series of ontologies) in the Western tradition through which we can sustain ourselves in the face of something much darker and more basic that lurks beyond or behind what we take to be our immediate and oft stated philosophical horizon? Have we only constructed metaphysical systems and made ontologies that

seem to bode well?⁴ And is there no place for tarrying with the negative, the strange, and the dark?

If we have ignored the other side of philosophy, then it is hard to know precisely why this is. Maybe it is because of a deeper metaphysical need we have for clear forms of individuation (as opposed to ambiguity), sameness (as opposed to otherness), order (as opposed to chaos), identity (as opposed to difference), system (as opposed to randomness), law (as opposed to anarchy), connections (as opposed to disassociations), and structures (as opposed to kinds of formlessness). (Douglas 1966) (Kristeva 1988) (Franklin 2016) Perhaps it is blind fear. At any rate, whatever the explanation, it may be incumbent upon us, not least given the times we are living in, to look much harder at the other side of things so as to see what sorts of other ontologies might be waiting in the wings.

Religious Ontology and Shit as Less-Than-Nothing⁵

One tradition that tries to create a metaphysics that on the surface is one of individuation, sameness, and order is that of Christianity. We can get a sense of how the ontology that accompanies this particular religious outlook works if we take a hint from the work of Simone Weil. Weil makes the following abstruse remark at one point in her book *Gravity and Grace*:

‘If God is 1, ∞ is the devil.’ (Weil 1947 [1999]: 93)

Why does she say this? God is one, on Weil’s view, because He is the single point of leverage on world. And this means that He can help us to overcome obstacles. But we might add to this thought and say, as others have done, that He is also *one* because he does not fall under a *kind* concept. He is not a *kind* of thing precisely because He is the one thing that embraces all kinds of thing. Kinds have instances, but not normally, as a matter of necessity, *an* instant. Not being a *kind* of thing means that God is not such as to conform to a particular classification.⁶ He is not such as to engage in typical sorts of behaviour; nor is He something that has a certain physiological make-up or something that is evolved in a specific way – unlike, say, human beings. (Scruton 2012: 11) Indeed, given that there is “infinite distance” (and difference) between Him and us (together with the world), along with His

genuinely dialectical relationship with us that this implies, we can say that God does not provide a space in which He is us and we are Him.⁷ (McCullough 2014: 90) In fact, as God is actually withdrawn from the world in Weil's sense, He thereby avoids what we might call the 'oneness of encompassing'.⁸ He is one, but not one with us.

In contrast to this, the devil is infinity because he represents the "infinite distance" that exists between God (Creator) and human beings (creation). (McCullough 2014: 90-91) Moreover, the devil is infinite because evil multiplies. (McCullough 2014: 100) But this very distance, and this multiplication, is redeemed by the crucifixion which is there to demonstrated human affliction.⁹ In addition to this thought about the devil we might embellish Weil's thought and say that his presence is everlasting in its indefiniteness. The devil, like God, is not a *kind* of thing either, though not because he is irredeemably singular. He is not a *kind* of thing because he is an infinite multiplicity that can take on many forms – some of them partially or wholly hidden from us. And, for that mysterious reason, we will always continue to be haunted by him. He is not, then, such as to make himself manifest in a singular way. Instead, the devil is much more something like an evil trickster (or, in more colloquial terms, a "confidence man") with a never-ending series of new and deceptive appearances and disguises. As is always noted in this regard: the devil has many forms; and this is what forces us to be in constant state readiness in relation to his ways.¹⁰

If God is one and the devil is infinity, then the next problem is that of how humans are to be situated in this ontological framework. One answer, of course, is that humans are 0. In fact, Weil says just this:

'If I thought that God sent me suffering by an act of his will and for my good, I should think that I was something, and I should miss the chief use of suffering which is to teach me that I am nothing.' (Weil 1947 [2002]: 111)

The connection between learning and suffering is vital here. Weil enlarges on this idea at various points in *Gravity and Grace* where she argues that what is required of us, and what matters to us, is that we are transformed so that we are capable of receiving teaching. Suffering for her, of course, does this. Indeed, it may be a condition of being able to receive teaching at all that we can suffer - and understand what suffering is. For in suffering, along with our experiencing wretchedness and

humility, we have the possibility of being taught, and, as a result, of coming to know that we are nothing. And in doing this the genuine hope is that we even come to “love being nothing”. (Weil 1966: 111)

For Weil, being nothing is not a given, but more of an achievement. As she goes on to say:

‘He who has not been able to become nothing runs the risk of reaching a moment when everything other than himself ceases to exist.’ (Weil 1966: 142)

The problem that must then concern us from here, then, is what else this idea that we are nothing implies. Is this a matter of *accepting* we are nothing as opposed to genuinely *believing* that we are nothing? McCulloch says something useful here:

‘What is to be realized is that the individual life is destined to be overruled by annihilation and negation; that from the time of birth, life is saturated with the destiny of death; that human life is a “nothingness.”’ (McCulloch 2014: 23)

In a sense, once we accept that we are nothing we can at last be humble before our own form of Being and before the world.

Žižek also gives a big hint of what is at stake in being nothing as a human being - and, as we shall see, less-than-nothing. In typical fashion he writes:

‘There is an old Jewish joke, loved by Derrida, about a group of Jews in a synagogue publicly admitting their nullity in the eyes of God. First, a rabbi stands up and says: “O God, I know I am worthless. I am nothing!” After he has finished, a rich businessman stands up and says, beating himself on the chest: “O God, I am also worthless, obsessed with material wealth. I am nothing!” After this spectacle, a poor ordinary Jew also stands up and also proclaims: “O God, I am nothing.” The rich businessman kicks the rabbi and whispers in his ear with scorn: “What insolence! Who is that guy who dares to claim that he is nothing too!”’ (Žižek 2014: 147)

This joke highlights how we cannot simply rid ourselves of the contamination of status (the Rabbi) or wealth (the business man). To reduce ourselves to nothing in the eyes of God is not possible by attempting to assimilate what we are socially by

an admission to God that we sit within the bounds of nullity. To be genuinely nothing we must, like the ordinary Jew, already be living it. But we must also accept that to be nothing is also to have a certain way of being.

In this joke we are given a clear sense that some form of disgusting remainder of what humanity is will always remain in spite of our prayers and forms of petition to the Almighty; yet at the same time, and in spite of this, it is evident that we may at least hope to make ourselves acceptable to divine grace by drawing attention to such things as status or wealth in the light of the (perhaps vain) anticipation that we will somehow be forgiven or purged of our brazen egotism by emptying ourselves of pretence.

Of course, what is funny about this joke is the sheer disingenuousness of the attempt to be nothing (or to present ourselves as nothing). Indeed, what this joke draws attention to is just how difficult it is to achieve the wretched position of actually *being* nothing, rather than just *saying* that you are nothing. To be nothing, if we frame it in Austin's terms, the performance of *saying* that you are nothing has to match the ontology of *being* nothing. However, what we observe is that the performance cannot close this gap. Instead, paradoxically, the nullity of being can only be achieved if one has already achieved it - as is the case with the last Jewish speaker.

An Ontological Framework for Christ

So where is Christ himself in this whole scheme? What is his role? Can he be said to guide us towards nullity in some way? And can we, through Christ, find a way to rid ourselves of the consoling illusions that are either internal to us (e.g. with the need for such things as integrity and authenticity) or else external to us (e.g. with the desire for material gain and social status)?

I think Christ's position can be seen more clearly if we consider Plato's theory Forms or Ideas first. On the standard view, Plato argues that there are two kinds of appearance and one kind of reality. The first kind of appearance is based on the idea of representation. A picture of a chair would be an example. Because pictures are mere images they are not what they purport to be, and this leads Plato reject them as something false. It is this accusation of deception that Plato uses to maintain that

artists, who exist to produce representations, should be banished from his ideal republic.¹¹

The second kind of appearance is based on the object itself. Again, take the chair as an object. Every actual chair we know is to be rejected too because it falls short of encompassing the ideal (or Idea) we have of it. An actual chair is really just a facsimile of the perfect idea we can have of a chair. And as finding perfection (and the ultimate nature of reality) is his central aim, Plato dismisses these things from his philosophy too. This leaves one thing. That is the reality and permanence of chairness: our perfect idea of what a chair is. Here we arrive at the Form or Idea that we were seeking. This is indeed perfect and can be recognized as such.

What is significant in the philosophy of Plato is that, of all the Forms, those that are of most interest to him are true, noble, dignified, important, worthy, and perfect. That is why the Forms of knowledge, beauty, justice, and love are central to the discussions that take place in various Platonic texts. However, when we consider the lowest material things – things such as dirt, mud (which is a mixture, as is dirt), hair (which is a part of an animal) and, we might add, excrement - we might think that these things must have Forms too. However, in the *Parmenides* (130b-d) Plato argues, somewhat surprisingly, that as these things are not natural unities, with a kind of separateness, they have no intrinsic value. That is obviously why he thinks we should not think of such things as having Forms. But whatever his official doctrine, it is difficult to see within his philosophical scheme how it could be that such things as dirt, mud, hair, and excrement might have a perfect Form. For these are not things that are true, noble, dignified, important, worthy, and perfect.

In addition to all of this, we can understand more of what Plato had in mind by examining what has been called the communion of Forms. (Hamlyn 1955) This is the idea that certain Forms exclude each other whilst others don't. What this means is that some Forms can combine, whilst others - not least due to contradictions, incompatibilities, anomalies, exclusions, and kinds of separation – cannot. And this puts the lowest material things under deep suspicion.

So why, more precisely, do we need communion of Forms here? We need it because we have to solve the problem of how 'a plurality of utterly distinct entities'

(e.g. human beings and their faults) can be combined with the view that ‘the world consists of one entity only’ (i.e. God with His perfection). (Hamlyn 1955: 295) There may of course, be various ways to deal with this as an issue, but one way is to make Christ stand outside this philosophical scheme (as shit) or as - 1. The reason for this is that he will then be able to speak and act from a position that is at one with these contradictions, incompatibilities, anomalies, exclusions, and kinds of separation.

To see more exactly how this works, I want to return to a point with which we began this piece: namely, the idea that, as Plato himself assumed, certain things that are disgusting, vile, or unpleasant have no real role to play in either metaphysics or ontology. Take shit as an example. In this case, a simple Platonic way of dividing things is follows:

- a) An image of shit as a form of representation.
- b) Shit itself as a material thing or as something that stands in for an object.
- c) The Form of shit as an Idea and ideal.¹²

How, then, do these ideas about shit relate to Christ? Again, Žižek shows us one way to make sense of things by making the following proposal about Protestantism and the excremental nature of human beings:

“Protestantism, finally, posits the relationship as *real*, conceiving Christ as a God who, in His act of Incarnation, freely *identified Himself with his own shit*, with the excremental real that is man – and it is only at this level that the properly Christian notion of divine love can be apprehended, as the love for the miserable excrement called ‘man’.” (Žižek 2011: 23-24)

But how can Christ be identified with his own shit if, in being identical with God and with the Holy Spirit, he is clearly perfect?

To work this out we need to consider what Žižek has to say about the Untouchables in his book *Living in the End Times*. At one point in his discussion Žižek describes these unfortunates as “an excremental zero-value element which, whilst formally part of the system, has no proper place in it.” (Žižek 2011: 23) He then goes on to say

that “they not only deal with impure excrements, their own formal status within the social body is that of excrement.” (Ibid.)

This, of course, is Christ’s role within the social body too, albeit with the element of the supernatural attached, which is why Christ himself is made not only to dwell in shit, but is also made to live amongst those regarded as the shit of the social body (e.g. the sick, the disabled, the destitute, those regarded as pariahs and so on). More than this, however, he is also formally shit in being a universalised form of outcast.¹³ In all of these three ways, Christ is less-than-nothing; and this is exactly how he then comes to function as the ultimate form of non-being that allows humanity to enjoy the gracious gift of being above that, viz. as *just* nothing.¹⁴

These thoughts, to place them within a philosophy of excrement, can be translated into the first-person as:

- 1) I am shit.¹⁵
- 2) I seem like shit to others.
- 3) I am made of shit and made to live in shit.¹⁶

These three points can be enlarged on in terms of the ontological, the social, and the material aspects of shit.

- 1) To *be shit* is to have a formal status as something that is inherently or intrinsically less-than-nothing. (The ontological claim)¹⁷

Comment

There are various things that Christ is able to share with us as ordinary human beings if he is formally shit. The main thing that this formal status gives him, of course, is a totalized and universal form of otherness. In short, he is more *other* as a human being than any other human being can ever be. And, in this way, he is able to represent human otherness as such. However, somewhat oddly, in being a totalized form of otherness (i.e. in being complete shit) Christ does not thereby become disgusting to us. He becomes disgusting (not least to those who oppose him) because he, as it were, breaks through the skin of our reality.

The distinction I am wanting to make in this instance between the otherness and disgustingness is clarified by Žižek in another context when he says simply:

'Disgust is not radical otherness. Disgust is when this thin skin, or whatever, this line of separation, breaks down and the inside comes outside. That's the moment of disgust.' (Žižek 2020)¹⁸

Although Žižek doesn't use this example, one could argue that what he describes here is like the moment in the film *Alien* where the alien itself breaks through the stomach of the character played by John Hurt. In this case, the 'hidden world is cataclysmically revealed'. (Thacker 2001: 68) This alien is rather like a monstrous birth that is, for the first time, exposed in all of its horror, thus showing us what being itself is really like. There is also an echo of this same idea of the dividing membrane earlier in the same film when the protagonists answer a distress call on moon LV-426 and Kane (one of the astronauts) discovers a chamber containing hundreds of large, opaque, egg-like objects which we only later find out are alien pods.¹⁹ The presence of Christ, then, is like this in that he represents the idea that God himself can break through the membrane of supernatural reality in order to expose himself to us and create an earth-shattering effect. We then discover

'Christ as a God who, in His act of Incarnation, freely *identified Himself with his own shit*, with the excremental real that is man.' (Žižek, 2011: 23)

At this point, we can make use of a more colloquial argument for the position I have just adumbrated. We often say: "I feel like shit because...". Then we fill in the sentence with comments about our feelings of shame, guilt, remorse, regret, and even worthlessness. This is where Christ comes in. Because he has the formal status of shit he is able to join us in these feelings and he too can then account for the desolation that we are experiencing in terms of our being because, as shit, he is positioned below us. After all, he is, as we have said, less-than-nothing. But, at the same, by being this (and by being the universal embodiment of this idea) he can also offer us hope and redemption. This can happen in one of two ways. First, we can use him for the purposes of confession, knowing that he himself has been in a position that is more wretched and hopeless than our own. Second, he can offer us a

means of salvation by encompassing the sins we have by carrying them for us, thus making them part of his own burden. (This, surely, is the lesson of the cross that we know he is *forced* to bare.)

The central point in terms of the ethos of Christianity - though Christians themselves might not put it in this way - is that we should be able to internalise the big Other that is Christ when he is conceived of as shit or as something that is less-than-nothing. And that is because it is only then that we can finally submit to the demands of morality and leave behind the idea that the most important thing is the sovereign individual who has dignity in an autonomous will. This idea, of course, is controversial because in the contemporary world a key social and political assumption is that the ultimate locus of value (with all its attendant problems concerning the obligation we feel when we are forced to enjoy choice) is the will of the self. However, one might say that it is better to sacrifice oneself to the idea that we are all shit than it is to submit to the many fragmentary dictates, temptations, and distractions of the market economy which in many ways is our dominant conception of the good today.²⁰

2) To be *treated* as shit is to be less-than-nothing in the eyes of others. (The social claim)

Comment

As a man, Christ is shit in the sense that he is viewed as such by others. He achieves this status, or lack of it, in the first instance by various acts of goodness that serve to lower himself socially. For example, by dwelling amongst the poor, needy, sick, disabled, hungry, rejected, etc he is, by association, made into the ultimate (and universal) outcast. The horror of this initial rejection from the social body is then compounded in the second instance not only by his being abandoned by those disciples closest to him, but also because he is forsaken by God himself. It is thus that he comes to stand proxy for all outcasts because he has undergone the ultimate act of expulsion, not just socially but supernaturally.

What is important to note here is just how these acts of rejection serve to position Christ as one of the fallen. Here I have in mind the well-known thought that groups

that are highly disadvantaged often act in such a way to confirm the prejudices of those who feel superior to them. They may do this by acting up and by giving those who look upon them disdainfully exactly the sort of behaviour they are looking for. In so doing, of course, they do not wish merely to confirm the position in which they have been placed, but to protest against it. In this lowering of their lowness they thereby reveal 'a subject position beyond this lowness' which, as we might say, is not occupied. (Pfaller 2017: 15) In short, they highlight a position that can only be established by complete and utter degradation - which in this case is the very position that is embodied by Christ himself. Yet this position of degradation, curiously, is one in which the sacred personality of Christ can still survive.

A specific example of what it is to be treated like shit is evident in Richard Hamilton's well-known artwork *The Citizen*. The picture represents the plight of Northern Irish prisoners who participated in the 'dirty protest' which lasted from 1978 to 1981, and which was part of a wider demand of theirs to be regarded as political prisoners by both prison authorities and the British government. The main image (on the right panel of *The Citizen*) depicts a hunger striker inside the high-security prison at Long Kesh, near Belfast - otherwise, known as the Maze and as the H Blocks. This figure is rather Christ-like in appearance as he stands before us wrapped in a blanket situated a room smeared with faeces. In being literally in the shit this figure somehow becomes a horrible excess; something that is 'too much' for us to bear in these disgusting circumstances - as Christ is for his detractors. On the left panel, in contrast, we see a further example of a wall on which shit has also been smeared. But here the shit is abstracted in such a way as to show exactly what it is to be purely nothing. In this way, the second panel is strangely indicative of an equalising force that tells us that we are really all in the shit.²¹

In approaching and surrounding himself with outcasts who are themselves treated like shit, Christ thereby demonstrates that the more etiolated and 'higher' forms of civic freedom (e.g. to believe what one will, to act as one wishes, to express opinions, to have desires that can be openly expressed, and to move about and engage with others with whom one chooses to associate) are very different from the more basic and fundamental kinds that involve the 'lower' human 'freedoms of access to water, hygiene, toilets, food and some personal space.' (Pfaller 2017: 7) In

performing this demonstration, though, Christ also highlights what it might mean for the total failure of ideas concerning justice to occur. For unless we can deal with these very base forms of justice first we will never arrive at a point where we can ever meet the most basic of human needs.²²

3) To be *made of*, or *constituted* by shit, is to be something that is regarded as less-than-nothing. (The material claim)

Comment

Shit, whilst being the most banal of all ordinary material substances, is not banal in terms of the way that we think of it. It is not banal because we think of it (and treat it) as something more than most material substances, not least given its uncontainability.²³ (Bataille 1995: 51-52) Shit fulfils this role as something uncontainable; or else as something we know can all too easily cleave to us, or to other things, leaving its indelible stains or marks on our being. And this is why we frequently fear getting caught up in it. It is also why it is often separated as quickly as possible from the individual who created it, and from the society that wishes to be rid of it.²⁴

Yet shit is also something less than an ordinary material substance in being so dismal and horrible; something we regard as repulsive; something that is polluted but that also pollutes. To call someone or something 'shit' is precisely to reduce them (or it) to that which is below any idea that we might otherwise have of a base level. Strangely, though, it is the complete lack of status that shit has that can also help form the basis of universal understanding. The idea of such an understanding is expressed in Heinrich Heine's poem that is quoted by Freud in *Interpretation of Dreams*:

'Selten habt Ihr mich verstanden/selten auch verstand ich Euch./Nur wenn wir im Kot uns fanden,/so verstanden wir uns gleich'.

['Rarely did you understand me, and rarely did I understand you; Only when we found ourselves in the muck did we understand each other at once.'] (Pfaller 2017:

6)

Christ, in some sense, makes himself shit so that he too can universalise himself so as to be better understood by others. For as shit, he is literally a substance of absolute abjection: one that is completely cast out, thrown away, jettisoned, discarded, radically excluded, and hence beyond the lowest of the low. He is, as it were, placed in a no place - beyond the pale.²⁵

Foster, describing the notion of the abject as it arises in another context, puts it like this:

'the abject is what I must get rid of *in order to be an I* ... It is a fantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it – too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries...' (Foster 1996, 153).

The substance he could be describing here is shit given that it is something both wholly alien to us yet very intimate with us. It is also the very thing that we have to rid ourselves of in order to be '*an I*' in that we think of shit as a challenge and opposition to what we are and want to be (i.e. this is the deep wish we have to be wholly lacking in any form of degrading quality or association). Indeed, the very form that shit takes in terms of its materiality (and volatility) seems vital to how it is considered. For it has precisely the sort of viscous and sticky quality (like blood, mud, pus, saliva, vomit, ooze, slime) that makes it subject to the ultimate form of reification and rejection in terms of how it is treated as a boundary object.²⁶ More than this, though, to be shit in the material sense makes the self:

"a dead thing, something analogous to matter.... [T]he thing we believe to be our self is as ephemeral and automatic a product of external circumstances as the form of a seawave." (Weil 1977: 438)

The idea of being treated like mere matter, along with the horrific thought that this might be all that we are, is expressed in ordinary parlance when we use the phrase 'You treat me like shit.' What we are supposed to be offered in Christ, though, is the recognition of the universality of this thought and feeling in epitome. We are all shit, but recognising this can raise up from a condition that might otherwise destroy us. For human beings the lesson is to acknowledge one's alienation from the world of

materiality in terms of our mental acts and dispositions and, yet, know that we are intimate with this materiality at the same time given our physical form of being. Admitting the materiality of shit into human ontology is, in a bizarre way, part of this acceptance; that in being human we have to consent to be nothing; and being nothing is being shit.²⁷

Conclusion

As we have seen, shit makes Christ into both a non-object and a non-subject. He has the condition of a non-object (e.g. as shit in terms of its materiality) and as a non-subject (i.e. in terms of Being shit in formal terms). And this explains why he finds himself in a condition of non-belonging (e.g. as being treated like shit) while maintaining, at the same time, his strange and abject duality at the boundary of being between the spirituality of heaven (immateriality) and the baseness of the Earth (materiality). As Springsted notes in talking about the concept of mystery in the work of the philosophy of Weil:

‘When incommensurates are reconciled their unity can be a witness to aspects and dimensions of our existence of which we may not have been previously aware, or at least were confused about.’ (Springsted 1985: 5)

The result of all of this, of course, is that Christ can never be regarded as completely human nor fully incorporated into the social body because he is situated, paradoxically, outside or below these worlds. He must always be outside things as a social pariah or below things as a someone who is ontologically and materially less-than-nothing. To paraphrase Kristeva, he must be a convulsion in the symbolic system that can be used to shake us to the core.²⁸ (Kristeva 1988)

As regards humans, then, Christian philosophy has great utility because through Christ’s teachings we can come to know why it is that we are so conflicted. To put it simply, it is because we exist at an abject boundary point between the purity and excessiveness of the divine grace that is granted to us through God, and the acceptance of deficiency in terms of the impurity of materialist shit in which we can find ourselves in Christ and in nature. As Kristeva argues:

'These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere, cadaver.*' (Kristeva 1988: 3)

This idea is dealt with systematically in Christianity when the cadaver of Christ is constructed as a representation (e.g. a crucifix). For the crucifix exists in a position that is between the pole of symbolised materiality (where Christ's dead body is shit) and the spiritual nourishment of his living soul as ascended to grace. This simple representation is not just one of literal decay (as would be the case were the dead body of Christ to be literally at hand) nor is it one of spiritual nourishment either (as would be the case where Christ to be alive and present before us). Instead, the crucifix straddles the two worlds of materiality and immateriality and thereby creates a strange sense of horror - a horror at the death of Christ - that makes us feel a genuine threat to our understanding of what meaning and reality are. Though, in doing so, it also serves to sanctify and underwrite the meanings and forms of reality we seek by offering us redemption.²⁹

Shit, as I have argued, is at the heart of the human condition. However, we can only be purified of shit by recognising Christ's relationship with it as set out in the three stances described above. In accepting Christ as having a form of being that is shit, in knowing that he is being treated like shit, and in recognising his constitution (materially) as shit we are thereby able to humble ourselves. When Christ acts through what Hegel called 'the labour of the negative' by using a kind of damaged ontology, sociality, and materiality to the greatest effect he is able to bring fourth the lessons we need. At the same time, though, the damage done to Christ is also allowed to cause the profoundest disquiet, revulsion, and trepidation in us by making us feel wholly out of place due to our being reminded of what we ourselves are (ontology), how we might seem to others (relationality), and what we are made of (materially).³⁰

In making us realise the importance of how Christ is ontologically, socially, and materially positioned we can close the gap between the varieties and vagaries of subjective human desire and its fulfilment by transmuting our attention so that our

focus is on a kind of nothing (or nonexistence) which, in turn, allows us to suspend ourselves (not least in judgement). However, for this to be a success our consent to, and our acceptance of, our ontological status as nothing, our social position as nobodies, and our material nullity has to be recognised. This is vital, not least because it allows us to find the real place of human beings in the world. This is a place that sits between the divine centre and oneness of an immaterial God (here representing infinite longing), and the peripheral and sometimes disgusting contingencies of material human beings (here involving us in finite desires that can never be fully satiated). It is Christ's position as less-than-nothing that teaches us this and that allows us to know this place for the first time.³¹

Bibliography

Austin, J. L. (2018) *How to Do Things with Words*, J. O Urmson ed., Martino Fine Books

Bataille, G. (1995) "Formless," in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, trans, Iain White, London: Atlas Press

Butler, R. (ed.) (2014) *The Žižek Dictionary*, London and New York: Routledge

Cameron, S. 'The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil's Performance of Impersonality' in *Critical Inquiry* , Vol. 29, No. 2 (Winter 2003), pp. 216-252

Derrida, J. (1978) trans. Alan Bass, *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press

Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger*, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul

Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Hants: Zero Books

Foster, H. (1996) *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press

Franklin, S. "The Context of Forms," in *World Picture* 11, (Summer, 2016)

http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_11/pdfs/Franklin_WP_11.pdf Accessed 26th April 2020

- Hamlyn, D. W. 'The Communion of Forms and the Development of Plato's Logic' in *Philosophical Quarterly*, (October, 1955), Vol 5. No. 21
- Kristeva, J. (1988) *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kuldova, T. and Chepstow-Lusty, L. A. (eds.) *Theses on Faeces: Encounters with the Abject, Journal of Extreme Anthropology*, Vol. 1, No. 1. – August 2017
- Laporte, D. (1978) *History of Shit*, trans. Rodolphe el-Khoury and Nadia Benabid, Cambridge, MA: MIT, (2002) in Giorgio Agamben, *The Open Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, (2004)
- Milbank, J. and Žižek, S. (2009) *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Ed. Creston Davis. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Miodownik, M. (2018) *Liquid: The Delightful and Dangerous Substances That Flow Through Our Lives*, Penguin
- Mc Cullough, L. (2014) *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction*, I. B. Tauris
- Nagle, A. (2017) *Kill All Normies: On-line Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr, to Trump and the Alt-Right*, Winchester: Zero Books
- Rosen, M. (2019) *Speculative Annihilationism: The Intersection of Archaeology and Extinction*, Winchester: Zero Books
- Scruton, R. (2012) *The Face of God*, London: Bloomsbury
- Serres, M. (1995) *The Natural Contract*, (trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Pulson) The University of Michigan Press
- Springsted, E. O. "Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," *Religion & Literature*, The University of Notre Dame, Vol. 17, No. 2, (Summer, 1985), pp. 1-16
- Thacker, E. (2011) *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy* Vol. 1, Winchester: Zero Books

Thacker, E. (2015) *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy* Vol. 2, Winchester: Zero Books

Thacker, E. (2015a) *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy* Vol. 3, Winchester: Zero Books

Watt, I. (1957) *The Rise of the Novel*, London: The Bodley Head

Weil, S. (1970) *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Weil, S. (1947 [2002]) *Gravity and Grace*, New York: Routledge

Weil, S. (1977) *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. G. Panichas, Mt. Kisco, New York: Moyer Bell

Weil, S. (1987) *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, ed. and trans. E. Geissbuhler, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Ark Paperback

Wollheim, R. (1984), *The Thread of Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Žižek, S. (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso

Žižek, S. and Milbank, J. (2009) *The Monstrosity of Christ*, MIT Press

Žižek, S. (2000) *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* London: Verso

Žižek, S. (2011) *Living in the End Times*, London: Verso

Žižek, S. (2012) *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and The Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London: Verso

Žižek, S. (2014) *Žižek's Jokes*, Cambridge: Mass: MIT Press

Internet:

Žižek and Psychoanalysis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkHfApuTLgk> Accessed: 2nd March 2020

Notes

¹ This paper is dedicated to my friend Terry Rosenberg.

² One might remark on how strange it is that we are not just influenced by what does not exist, but even, paradoxically, worried by the extent of what does not exist. Perhaps God is the best representation of the magnitude of this negation. It is easy to forget here that (at least for those who believe) whilst God is the Creator of all that there is He is also the Creator (or 'negator') of all that there isn't. Ontology, if it is to fulfil its role in philosophy, must deal with, and give an account of, both all of what there is and all of what there isn't.

³ There are exceptions. Speculative annihilationism (Rosen), the powers of horror (Kristeva), horror as metaphysics (Thacker), necro-ontology (Finbow), philosophical apocalypticism (Calder Williams), and weird realism (Harman) all give us a different sort of ontological emphasis. Žižek himself is also not afraid to confront various strange, abject, violent, and disgusting topics either. Amongst them are disaster, darkness, negation, and black humour. (Žižek 2011) (Žižek 2012) These are important contributions to the philosophical corpus not least because they are rare. As Rosen says:

'Our ontology foregrounds stasis and permanence, relegating talk of decay, degeneration, putrefaction, and extinction, and the like to the postulatory back-burner.' (Rosen 2019: 1)

⁴ It could be argued that this positivity extends to the Pre-Socratics who placed an emphasis on various positive, elemental, and undifferentiated substances such as water, fire, and air: substances that can then take on various forms. These substances seem to have been chosen because they have an all-encompassing form of coverage that can then provide for the kind of totalising explanation that helps to account for both order and chaos in the universe. It would have been a brave, but perhaps not completely stupid, philosopher at this stage in the history of the subject who was willing to invoke shit as the basis of all things – not least given its highly disorderly nature. After all, everything in the end goes to shit.

⁵ Philosophically speaking, we might say that shit is a reminder of change and decay. It is something that refuses to be incorporated; and this applies to the personal, the social, or the ontological; it is even that which sits outside the idea of the margin or that which is beyond the margin. In this way, shit represents not so much *matter* out of place (Douglas), but a whole ontology that is out of place. This makes shit pataphysical. We should remember, in this regard, that Jarry's pataphysical play *Ubu Roi* is sometimes translated as 'King Turd'. Indeed, the general excremental attitude of the play is expressed both in the first word, which is 'merdre': the French word for 'shit', albeit with an extra 'r', and in the fact that a toilet brush is produced in Act I with shit on it for all to taste.

⁶ Weil implies this sort of idea is right when she speaks of how love is real when it is for an object. The exception is the case of God where love is "without an object". (McCullough 2014: 54)

⁷ This, of course, is not a view that would be accepted by Christian orthodoxy. (McCullough 2014: 89-90)

⁸ Pantheism, then, is something that Weil would reject. One "bulwark" against pantheism, she says, is contradiction. (Weil 1970: 134)

⁹ There is also infinite distance between God and Christ in both the descent into flesh and in the crucifixion.

¹⁰ We could say that the Devil is what Žižek in another context refers to as a "spurious infinity" in the sense that he just mindlessly reproduces himself. The Devil in this way is like Capital: a seemingly blind destructive force that appears to have no meaning. (Žižek 2011: 216)

¹¹ As Iris Murdoch once pointed out, Plato didn't actually banish the artists. He merely asked for them to be escorted to the border of the ideal state.

¹² It is good to note, as Serres remarks, that: 'just as certain animals piss on their territory so that it stays theirs, many men mark and dirty the things they own by shitting on them, in order to keep them, or shit on other things to make them their own.' (Serres 1995: 33) One might think of Christ as marking his territory as truly holy by his connection with shit in terms of being, sociality, and materiality.

¹³ Žižek describes outcasts as those whose "main task is to deal with all kinds of excrement, the putrefying dead remainders of life (from cleaning the toilets to butchering animals and disposing of human bodies)." (Žižek 2011: 18) In particular, he thinks that those who have no place in the system (e.g. the "Untouchables"), by the very logic of their excremental status, can come to stand for "universality" of the "whole of humanity". (Žižek 2011: 23) This, I maintain, is really the role that Christ plays - or should play.

¹⁴ What may trouble us deeply here is not just that we are nothing, but the idea that we may become something that is less-than-nothing. The idea that we may come to have a deprived or damaged ontology that consists in being less-than-nothing is the thing that concentrates the mind.

¹⁵ In this instance I am concerned with the 'am' of identity and individuation as opposed to the 'am' of constitution, which is about materiality. The latter idea is discussed under heading 3).

¹⁶ Here you are literally in the shit and hence, at least from the social viewpoint, contaminated to the point of absolute removal. This is obviously the case with the Untouchables. Though, paradoxically, Christ reveals himself by being contaminated to the point where he is finally identified for what he is.

¹⁷ A fuller ontology of shit would have to include feeling like shit (state), looking like shit (appearance), being shat on (process), the shit hitting the fan (event), shit stirring (action), shitting it out (movement), and gone to shit (end-point).

¹⁸ This is similar to the idea that Kristeva has of a film, membrane, skin, or lining that creates a kind of turbulence in us because it is neither solid nor liquid, inner nor outer, neither protecting us from what is inside nor protecting from what is outside. The key notion here is that of the abject, which concerns that which does not respect borders; that which is 'at the boundary of what is assimilable'. (Kristeva 1988: 18) These are things that are in-between and hence not subject to any recognised or familiar form of classification or to a set of rules. The examples she gives include: an open wound, a corpse, shit, sewage, disease, small holes, rotten food, the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk, liminal spaces, amorality, and so on. Though, in an unexpected twist, she argues that the abject is 'edged with the sublime'. (Kristeva 1988: 11) An example of an object edged with the sublime might be a stained-glass window. (Kristeva 1988: 12) In this instance the spiritual world shines in as an answer to the questions that humans pose in wonder; the window being the fragile coloured boundary between the natural and the supernatural. Perhaps fireworks are in some way sublime too in the way that they position us between the present and eternal danger of fire and the distanced spectacle and excitement of exploding light. (Kristeva 1988: 27) The fact that such things are placed between worlds - and the fact that this can lead to us to feeling disgust or else to us having a sense of the sublime - shows that there is the possibility within the abject of impurity as well as purity. In any case, one could argue that Christ is part of what we should call "the abject sublime": a shining and fragile light between material being and eternity.

¹⁹ More than this, however, we should note that disgust is not always a matter of the inside breaking through to the outside. In fact, its opposite - where the outside moves to the inside - can be just as disgusting. For instance, if a hand touches an object, and then reaches inside that object by breaking some form of membrane only to feel a really slimy substance within, then disgust is also in the offing. One might say that we see something close to this in the representation of 'The Incredulity of Saint Thomas' in the version of the painting by Caravaggio (c. 1601–1602). In this picture, the figure of Christ has a wound in the form of a small hole in his side. The figure of the doubting Thomas is seen to have placed his finger inside the wound as if to test it.

As we look at this image and think about what it might be like to touch this wound for ourselves, we start to feel a sense of unease, and even disgust. This moment is, of course, vital to the story as it acts to shock us into the act of believing, thereby revealing that which is supposed to be genuine and true about Christ's resurrection. We could call this moment one of 'visceral verification'. This scene, we might maintain, is representative of the abject in Kristeva's sense in that it draws attention to the fragile boundary between human death and spiritual life.

I think it plausible, then, to argue for a basic contrast in cases of disgust. When disgust comes from the inside the shock often consists in suddenly coming to know exactly what is there for the first time (e.g. that something is an alien, as in the example from earlier), whereas when disgust is initiated from the outside (e.g. a person with a blindfold having their hand plunged into a jar of cold baked beans) the shock consists not so much in knowing what is there but in a response that it is not at all what was expected. This latter case is more about the shock of feeling rather than just the shock of knowing.

²⁰ There are problems here about what we are to say concerning the external influence of a God that turns out not to exist, and whether living your life with the belief that there is a form of genuine guidance out there is really possible given this fundamental ontological deficit.

There are lots of other problems about the non-existence of God. Though, as we might say, if God does not exist then this may be the least of His problems. Even though, of course, His non-existence may still be the biggest of our problems.

²¹ In more general terms it can be argued that the socially excluded figure is always required by the body politic. In fact, societies often go to great lengths to identify and acquire such figures. Often the character needed most is that of the scapegoat. The scapegoat is vital because in a situation where there is a crisis this is the person that will be sacrificed to help purge the political body of the element that appears to be poisoning it.

Christ is an extraordinary figure not least in that he is used as a universalised form of the scapegoat. As such, he serves us by providing a response in the crucifixion which has the amazing effect of ending the very idea of human sacrifice as a social necessity. It is as if any notion of human sacrifice in the face of his ultimate gesture of offering his own life for us must, as a result, be seen as sacrilegious.

²² In being undifferentiated from the co-called 'lower orders' (as shit), Christ has a place, given his identity with God, that shows us what it might be like to pass from this condition to more determinate and important ends.

²³ One of the reasons that shit (as opposed to a turd) is uncontainable is that it is formless. As Bataille notes: "*formless* is not only an adjective having such and such a meaning, but a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that every thing should have a form." (Bataille in Franklin 2006: 3) Christ is materially shit because, like shit, he is in some sense declassified. He fails to conform to the registers of ordinary human thinking or conceptualisation.

²⁴ Whether shit is directly in front of us, or else hidden behind plumbing, we are somehow always aware of its presence.

²⁵ The phrase 'beyond the pale' meaning simply 'outside the boundaries'.

²⁶ Blood is a vital substance in Christianity: we not only drink Christ's blood, but we also aware of his bleeding out on the cross. The body and flesh of Christ are vital to Christianity too. Indeed, the body and the flesh (like blood) are obviously substances and materials of life itself. However, at the same time, they are also such as to be thought of as in some way objectionable or else to be rejected (at least in some contexts) given that they are very much part of the baseness of our animal nature.

²⁷ Weil's say this about the matter: 'our consent can only be a reflection of that of the Christ' (Weil 1987: 195).

²⁸ Christ, on one view, has what we might call 'a double nature'. He is both human (and hence subject to the natural order) yet he is also supernatural in being God (and so not subject to the natural order). As a human being he is natural being and part of the causal order, but as a supernatural being he is part of the ethereal world and hence not subject to causal laws. However, on a keontic conception of Christiology, where Christ gives up some of his divine attributes (e.g. in Being shit and as the lowest of the low in ontological, social, and material terms), he need not thereby contaminate God. For it is important, one might think, that God Himself is able to remain exalted (and pure) in the face of the ontological, social, and material things that could sully Him.

At the extreme, these contradictory forms of ontological, social, and material positioning serve to place human beings between both ends of what Kristeva calls the 'drive scale', not least because of the way we, as human beings, can become beautifully suspended on the delicate border between such feelings as 'acceptance and rejection', 'excitement and disgust', and 'joy and repulsion'. (Kristeva 1988: 204) It is perhaps only in facing these contradictions - which can be construed as oppositions, contraries, or as forms of paradox, incommensurability, and revealed mystery - that we can be led to, amongst other things, the truth about the relationship between Christ, God, and ourselves in Weil's philosophy. (Springsted 1985)

²⁹ It is through the complete waste of his being (in death), in his terrible treatment by others, and in his ambiguous materiality that the person of Christ is revelatory for us. Indeed, it is in these very things we see not only how low we can sink, but also how high we can ascend. Christ reduces himself to less-than-nothing by being shit, by being treated like shit, and by being made of shit. This, remarkably, makes him into the most contingent of objects, but also into the most necessary of ideas.

³⁰ It is possible to rephrase the thought expressed here in terms that have been advanced by Derrida. The idea is this: the economy of Christianity is relegated to a relationship between "that which exceeds" (viz. Christ as shit) and "the exceeded totality" (i.e. God as pure). Human beings are, as it were, the absolute excess of the difference and the deferral between the two. (Derrida 1978: 62)

³¹ Applying the Hegelian dialectic that Žižek adopts we can say that God is affirmation, Christ is negation, and human beings are the negation of negation. If we view things like this then we will come to his view that 'religion only arrives at its truth through its self-cancellation'. (Žižek 2011: 401)